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University of Dayton

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## NEWS RELEASE

### **FITZ REFLECTS ON 23-YEAR RUN AS PRESIDENT, CHALLENGES STUDENTS TO LEARN TO LEAD BY SERVING**

DAYTON, Ohio — As Brother Raymond L. Fitz, S.M., wraps up the last few months of his record 23-year stint as the University of Dayton's president, he grows reflective and nostalgic.

"I'll walk out with tears in my eyes," he concedes. "There will be a sadness but an immense sense of accomplishment. The University of Dayton has made a mark in the community, in the state and nationally."

In April, three events are planned to celebrate Fitz's presidency and his commitment to faith, community and service (see sidebar). In May, he will award diplomas to the class of 2002. More than half of UD's 86,000 living alumni have received their degrees from Fitz, the youngest president to ever lead UD.

Fitz's mark is indelible. Under his leadership, the University of Dayton has grown into one of the nation's largest Catholic universities, a thriving residential university with a national and international reach. In the decade between 1990 and 2000, applications soared more than 60 percent, and college entrance test scores now stand at an all-time high. UD has earned a national reputation for its use of technology in education and ranks among the 20 top wired universities in the country. It's won local repute for its work in rebuilding neighborhoods, protecting children and reforming urban education.

Humble and unpretentious, Fitz is known as a consensus builder and a planner. An engineer by training, he champions servant-leadership. He has used his platform as president to provide community leadership ranging from race relations to human services delivery to protection of children to education reform.

"We challenge students to learn beyond what they thought they could," says Fitz, a 1960

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UD graduate who's spent four decades on campus in roles ranging from a professor of engineering to executive director of the Center for Christian Renewal. "You're not given an education for yourself. There's a social obligation to make a difference in society and the community in which you live. How do we deal with the least advantaged in our communities? How do we deal with world issues, like hunger?"

One legacy of Fitz's presidency is an innovative humanities-based general education curriculum. Regardless of their major, all undergraduates read, study and make connections across disciplines, drawing from the same books in English, history, religion and philosophy courses. "From an academic standpoint, I'm proud of the strength of the humanities," he observes. "We've built a curriculum and increased the number of humanities faculty by 20 percent because the humanities are an important part in the education of every student — whether they're an engineer or an accountant."

In an age when the typical college president serves 7.3 years, Fitz, 60, has outlasted his peers despite the absence of a priest's collar (he's the first Marianist brother to lead the University of Dayton since the death of Brother Maximin Zehler, S.M., in 1872) and on top of personal adversity. A dozen years ago he was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, a nonfatal yet sometimes debilitating disease of the central nervous system.

What drives him? It's not money. As a Marianist brother, he's taken a vow of poverty and shares a modest house in the student neighborhood with other Marianists. It's not the limelight. He's the first to tell you he's an introvert.

"It's the generosity and love of the people on this campus," he says. "There's a generosity and community spirit that's contagious. The faculty, staff and students here are an energizing force. ...The faculty keep challenging students, 'What are your dreams made of?' If it's just economic success, that's not enough."

He tells students to develop a personal passion. For him, it's children and families. The Montgomery County Family and Children First Council gives the Raymond L. Fitz, S.M., Ph.D. Award annually to a front-line agency worker or grassroots community member "who exemplifies Brother Ray's dedication and commitment to the cause of nurturing and protecting children as evidenced by his years of leadership and service." Since the early 1990s, following several highly publicized deaths of children from abuse, he's worked with the Montgomery County Board of Commissioners and multiple public and private agencies to create an integrated child-protection

system. Today, he serves on the executive committee and school readiness committee of the Family and Children First Council and chairs the Dayton Public Schools Community Advisory Council. At the state level, he co-chaired the student assessments and intervention strategy committee on the Governor's Commission for Student Success.

"He went so far beyond being the president of the University of Dayton," says Vicki Pegg, chair of the Montgomery County Commission. "He became one of the primary movers in this entire community, perhaps this entire region. If we are to honor him, we are to take his lead. Get involved. Protect the children. Eliminate the violence. Take care of those who need it the most."

Ohio Gov. Robert Taft also praises Fitz's leadership in building community partnerships. "Brother Ray has really moved the University of Dayton in the direction we're trying to move all universities — that is in collaborating more with each other and being active and vigorous in their communities with community leaders and community organizations."

In Catholic higher education nationally, Fitz is known for his efforts in preserving religious identity and academic freedom. "The University of Dayton has a very strong reputation as a school that has maintained its Catholic continuity in changing times. He carries a good deal of the responsibility for that," says Monika Hellwig, executive director of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities. "In exchanges we had with the bishops (over *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, an apostolic constitution on Catholic universities), Ray Fitz was always a strong but clear but very prudent voice."

When Fitz steps down on June 30, he will enroll in a six-month spiritual renewal sabbatical program at the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley. In January, he will return to campus to teach classes and work in UD's Center for Leadership in Community.

"Through the work of the center, students and faculty will work shoulder to shoulder with people trying to rebuild Dayton's neighborhoods and improve the quality of schools," he says. "We're trying to create an environment where students are excited about volunteer service. We have a responsibility beyond our jobs. We have a responsibility to build our communities."

"Everyone needs to see their life in that way."

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For archival photos or to request an interview, contact **Teri Rizvi** or **Pam Huber** at (937) 229-3241.